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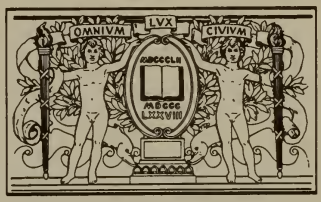

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West Roxbury

Neighborhood Profile
1988

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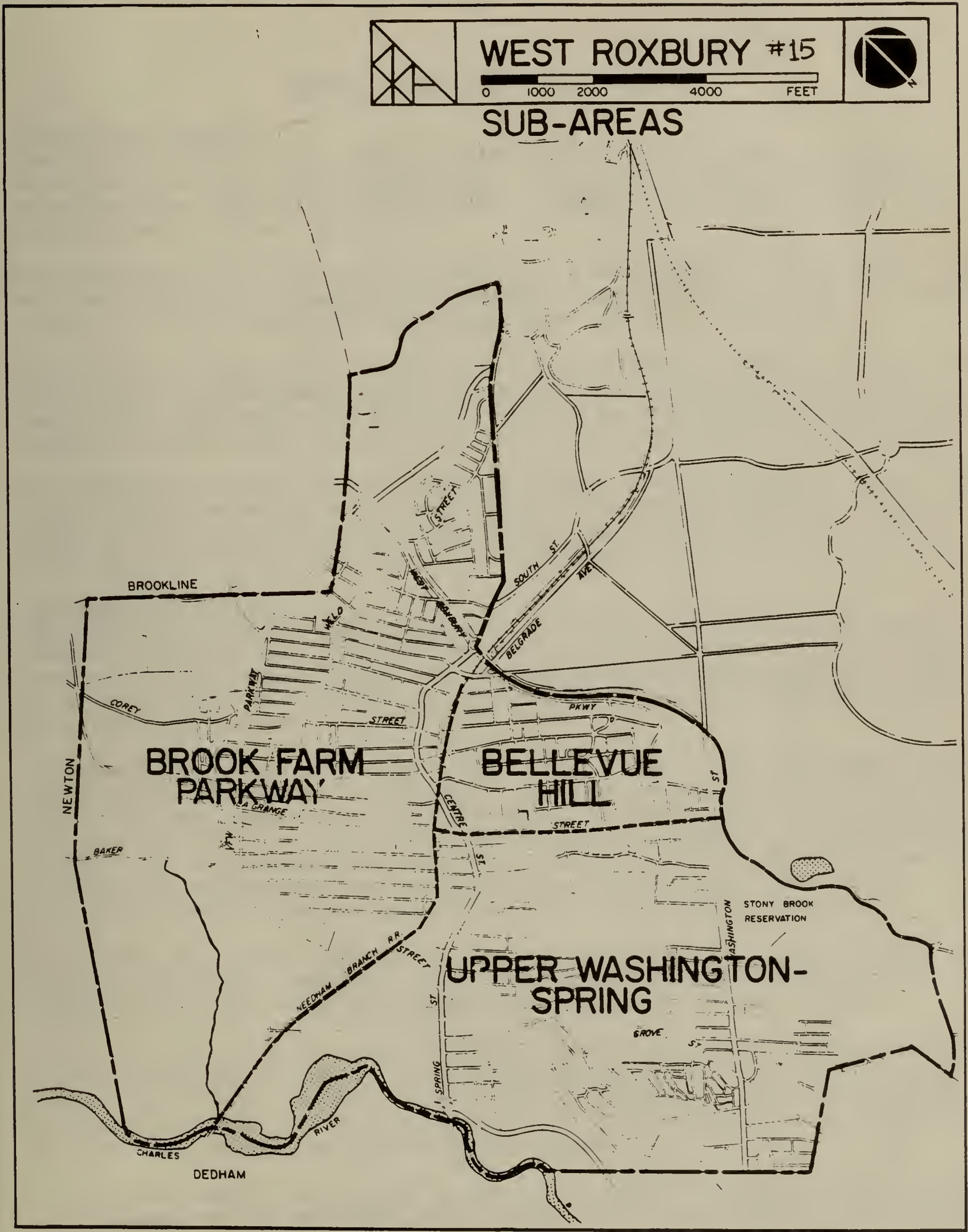
WEST ROXBURY #15
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BROOKLINE
NEWTON
DEDHAM
CHARLES RIVER
BROOK FARM PARKWAY
BELLEVUE HILL
UPPER WASHINGTON-SPRING
STONY BROOK RESERVATION
SOUTH ST.
BELGRADE AVE
CENTRE ST
WASHINGTON ST
SPRING ST
GROVE ST
COREY STREET
BAKER
NEEDHAM BRANCH RR.
PKWY
STREET

WEST ROXBURY NEIGHBORHOOD PROFILE

Introductory Overview

West Roxbury, located about 8 miles southwest of downtown Boston, is the most suburban of the City's neighborhoods. Its 1985 population was 34,703 persons. It abuts Roslindale, Hyde Park, and the towns of Dedham, Newton, and Brookline, and contains nearly 5 square miles.

The neighborhood is essentially a community of spacious single- and two-family homes with well-kept lawns and gardens on tree-lined streets. The Centre Street commercial area is one of the most viable neighborhood shopping areas in the City.

West Roxbury has the second highest median family income in Boston. In 1985, it also had the highest percentage of persons over 55 of any neighborhood in the City. Families with older adults and elderly persons are the most striking feature of West Roxbury although younger families with children have been growing in the 1980s.

The community is within an easy automobile commute into the center of Boston. West Roxbury is also served by bus to the terminus of the MBTA orange line at Forest Hills. The Dedham branch of the commuter train is expected to reopen in 1987 following the completion of the orange line relocation.

I. Neighborhood History

The area known as West Roxbury today was in its early years part of the Town of Roxbury, founded in 1630. At that time, the district was wooded and rocky, with marshes along the Charles River. The flatlands were devoted primarily to farming. By the early 1800s, the rudiments of West Roxbury Village had formed along Centre Street near Spring Street.

Two famous institutions were located here. Roxbury Latin School, the oldest private grammar school in America, was founded in 1645 and operates today at the same site near Centre and Spring Streets. In 1841 one of the farms in West Roxbury became the site of a famous Utopian experiment: the Brook Farm community. By 1847, the group dissolved due to financial losses when the new dormitory was destroyed by fire. In January 1977 an extensive fire destroyed several key buildings. The Boston Landmarks Commission has designated Brook Farm as as Historic Landmark.

As a result of a conflict between the rural and more developed parts of Roxbury, West Roxbury split off from Roxbury in 1851. The rural Town of West Roxbury then included areas known today as Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and West Roxbury.

In 1851 the Dedham Branch of the railroad opened, bringing West Roxbury within easy commuting distance of Boston. Three stations served the area encompassed in the present day planning district, and small scale entrepreneurs began building homes for the commuting middle classes near the rail line. The first wave of construction after the Civil war formed initial patterns of development.

In 1874 West Roxbury was annexed to the City of Boston. During a second wave of homebuilding from the mid-1880s to the 1890s, streets were laid out in about half the district.

By 1920 less than one fourth of the residential units now existing had been built. A building boom in the decade of the 1920s increased the housing stock to nearly half

that of the present day. The Parkway and Mt. Vernon areas were nearly three-fourths developed, and Bellevue Hill was over half-developed. Construction continued during the Depression at about half the 1920s rate, developing much of the remaining land in these neighborhoods.

The few homes built in the 1940s were constructed in the Brook Farm-Sawmill area, bringing the number of homes in this area to about three-fourths the present day number. The remaining lots were developed for the most part during the 1950s. Nearly all post-war residential construction in the district was concentrated in the Upper Washington-Spring Streets area. In this southern portion of West Roxbury, about half of the units were built during the 1950s and 1960s.

Table Ia. Population and Housing, 1950 - 1980

	1950	1960	1970	1980
Population	26,660 (3.2)	28,098 (4.0)	34,989 (5.5)	31,333 (5.6)
Housing units	7,087 (3.2)	8,319 (3.5)	11,026 (4.7)	12,274 (5.1)
Persons/unit	3.6	3.4	3.2	2.6

Note: figures in brackets are percent of Boston total.
Source: a)
See section at end of profile describing sources, as well as the methodology.

II. Demographics

West Roxbury's population 1985 at 35,687 is higher than it has ever been. Most of the population lives in households rather than in group quarters except for some older persons in nursing homes. West Roxbury had the third highest median age of any neighborhood at 35.1 while 32 percent of all persons were age 55 or older. There was also a lesser share of teen-aged and young adults.

Table IIa. Population, 1985*

	Total	Population in group quarters	Household population	Persons per household
West Roxbury	34,703	886	33,816	2.7
City of Boston	601,095	49,595	551,500	2.4

* Note difference between total population and household population. Most of the following tables refer to household population as explained in the end notes for source b).

Table IIb. Age Composition of Household Population, 1985 (in percent)

	Median age	0-14	15-24	25-34	35-54	55+
West Roxbury	35.1 yrs	15	19	15	18	32
City of Boston	28.8 yrs	17	23	22	20	18

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
Source: b)

With 96 percent white and only 5 percent of other minority groups, the racial composition of West Roxbury's population was noticeably homogeneous.

Table IIc. Racial/Ethnic Composition of Household Population, 1985
(in percent)

	White, not Hispanic	Black	Hispanic*	Asian	Other races
West Roxbury	96	1	2	2	0
City of Boston	62	25	7	5	1

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
* Hispanic includes self-designated Hispanics plus those who speak Spanish in the home or were born in a Spanish-speaking country
Source: b)

West Roxbury is a neighborhood comprised mainly of traditional couples, some with children and some without, and had a smaller share of households composed of single persons and unrelated roomates than citywide.

Table IId. Household Composition, 1985
(in percent)

	Traditional families and couples	Single parent households	Single person household	Household of unrelated individuals
West Roxbury	53	16	22	9
City of Boston	36	16	34	14

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
Source: b)

III. Income and Poverty

West Roxbury had a median household income of $27,400 in 1984, the highest of all neighborhoods except for Back Bay/Beacon Hill and downtown Boston. In addition, West Roxbury's poverty rate was one of the lowest in the City.

Table IIIa. Median Household Income and Portion in Poverty, 1979 and 1984

	Median household income		Percent in poverty			
	1979	1984	1979 all persons	1984 all persons	1984 all families	1984 unrelated persons
West Roxbury	$18,645	$27,400	5	8	10	0
City of Boston	12,530	19,250	20	21	22	17

Source:

IV. Mobility and Migration

Since 73 percent of its population was born in Massachusetts, West Roxbury is a more close-knit traditional family neighborhood than most districts. However, a full 7 percent of its residents were born in Europe, likely due to its large older Irish population. Residents of West Roxbury also do not move as often as those in other neighborhoods, again owing largely to its older population. Some 54 percent of its residents were in their homes for eleven years or longer, nearly twice the city average of 29 percent.

Table IVa. Place of Birth of 1985 Residents
(in percent)

	Massachusetts	Other U.S. and Canada	Europe	Elsewhere
West Roxbury	73	10	7	10
City of Boston	55	25	5	15

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
Source: b)

Table IVb. Years in Dwelling Unit of 1985 Household Residents
(in percent)

	<2	2-5	6-10	11-15	16+
West Roxbury	15	13	19	15	39
City of Boston	28	27	16	10	19

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
Source: b)

V. Employment

Labor force participation of West Roxbury's adults matches the City average. However, the 4 percent unemployment rate was noticeably lower in the neighborhood. West Roxbury workers are prevalent in the services, government, and financial industries. Only 8,000 jobs are located in West Roxbury since it is primarily a residential area. Most of these jobs are in retail trade and services industries.

Table Va. Labor Force Status, Spring 1985
(in percent)

	Participation rate (Persons aged 16 yrs +)	Unemployment rate
West Roxbury	65	4
City of Boston	66	6

Source: b)

Table Vb. Industry of Resident Workers, 1985
(in percent)

	Manuf'g	Trade	F.I.R.E*	Services	Gov't	Other
West Roxbury	7	17	9	34	20	14
City of Boston	14	16	8	36	11	15

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
* F.I.R.E. is an abbreviation for Finance, Insurance and Real Estate.
Source: b)

Table Vc. Employment Located Within Neighborhood, 1983
(in percent)

	Manuf'g	Trade	F.I.R.E.	Services	Gov't	Other
West Roxbury	400	2,500	800	1,600	1,500	1,200
City of Boston	48,900	81,000	78,800	171,000	91,500	58,100

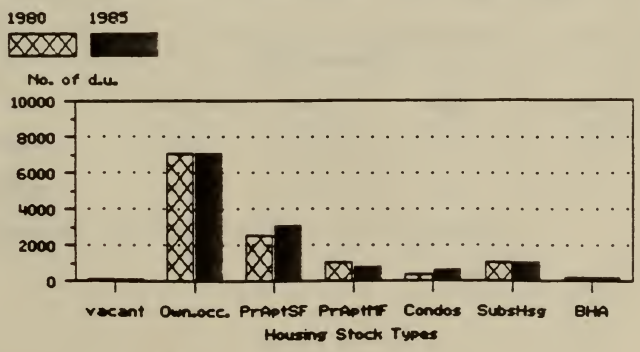
Source: c)

VI. Housing

West Roxbury was like most other suburban towns in the prevalence of single family homes. In 1980, almost sixty percent of West Roxbury's housing consisted of 1-4 family, owner-occupied units, while nearly thirty percent were private apartments. The remainder was mainly subsidized housing, including 936 units in Georgetown, plus several hundred condominiums and 176 units of BHA housing.

Between 1980 and 1985, West Roxbury's housing stock expanded by some 5 percent, primarily through accessory apartment conversions within its 1-4 unit structures as average household size declined. The 280 additional condominiums resulted from the conversion of pre-existing private, multi-family developments.

Table VIa. Housing Stock Composition by Structure Types, 1980 and 1985
(in dwelling units)



WEST ROXBURY	Private Housing and Condos						Assisted Housing			
Stock type:	1-4 vacant	Own.occ.	PrAptSF	PrAptMF	CondoSF	CondoMF	SubsHsg	BHA		Total
1-4(SF)/5+(MF)	1-4(SF)	1-4(SF)	1-4(SF)	5+(MF)	1-4(SF)	5+(MF)	Mixed	5+(MF)		Mixed
1980	1% 84	7,065	2,484	1,036	0	325	1,044	176		12,214
% of pl.dist.	1	58	20	8	0	3	9	1		100
1985	1% 51	7,081	3,086	760	2	605	1,044	176		12,805
% of pl.dist.	0	55	24	6	0	5	8	1		100
change '80-'85	(33)	16	602	(276)	2	280	0	0		591
% chg from '80	(39)	0	24	(27)	inf	86	0	0		5

Source: c)

West Roxbury's mean housing value in 1985 was $150,000, which only trailed Back Bay/Beacon Hill, the South End, and Downtown Boston. This value represented the highest housing value of any of Boston's outer neighborhoods. Median gross rents in West Roxbury at $420 per month topped the City's $400 mark.

Table VIb. 1-3 Family Property Values and Median Gross Rents, 1980 and 1985

	1-3 family property values		Median monthly gross rents	
	1979	1985	1980	1985
West Roxbury	$47,000	$150,000	$296	$420
City of Boston	32,000	115,000	254	400

Source: b)

VII. Transportation

West Roxbury had the highest use of vehicles and the lowest use of the MBTA in journey to work trips than any of Boston's sixteen neighborhoods. Only seven percent of West Roxbury households had no vehicles, the lowest mark in Boston. Conversely, 93 percent of households had one or more autos, the highest mark in the City.

Table VIIa. Means of Household Transportation to Work, 1985
(in percent)

	Vehicle	MBTA	Walk	Other
West Roxbury	83	14	1	2
City of Boston	50	33	15	3

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
Source: b)

Table VIIb. Number of Vehicles Owned per Household, 1985
(in percent)

	None	1	2	3 or more
West Roxbury	7	53	30	10
City of Boston	39	42	14	5

Note: Percent may not total to 100 due to rounding.
Source: b)

VII. Summary of Recent and Imminent Development

The West Roxbury planning district will have experienced $108 M (million) in investments during the 1975 to 1989 period, according to source e), with 47 percent of it, or $51 M in the residential sector. This will have served to develop a total of 916 dwelling units (DU), of which 888 DU are new construction (97%), and 28 are adaptive reuse (3%). It will have created 389 rental units (42%), 244 condo units (27%), 57 single family units (6%), 104 B.H.A. units (11%), and 122 unclassified units (13%).

Medical investments totalling $42.6 M, 39 percent of all development, are the result of two projects. First, in 1985 the Harvard Community Health Plan completed its 3 story facility that cost $4.6 M. The second project is the Veterans Administration $38 M expansion which will add 150,000 square feet (SF) to the Hospital on VFW Parkway.

Some $7 M will have been invested in the retail sector over the 1975 to 1989 period. The retail developments consist three new retail buildings, two of which are on the VFW Parkway. The third is on Washington Street.

Development of office space in West Roxbury is on the rise with the expediture of $1.1 M on three new office projects in recent years. The first is a Bay Bank branch office on Centre Street, completed in 1985. The second is an addition to the Bank of Boston branch office, also on Centre Street, to be completed in 1987. The third project is a two story office space to be built and completed on VFW Parkway by 1989.

Sources and Methodology

a) - *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1950 - 1980*

b) - *B.R.A. and P.F.D. Household Survey, 1985*, conducted by the Center for Survey Research, U. Mass. at Boston. A sample of over 2,000 households, carefully drawn to reflect Boston's household population, was questioned in the spring of 1980, to parallel the 1980 U.S. Census. In 1985, exactly five years later, the same methodology was employed again to obtain an update and to identify neighborhood shifts. This survey did not include the group quarters population

To learn more about changes in these planning districts by 1985, the several thousand observations available from the 1985 BRA/PFD Household Survey were differentiated to the limit. Knowing such changes as the shift in number of persons by race/ethnicity and age group in each district is valuable for planning. However, this divides the available data into so many cells that it limits reliability tests. The inferences should therefore be viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive.

c) - *Boston's Changing Housing Patterns, 1970 to 1985*, Rolf Goetze, consultant to the B.R.A., November 1986. The 1980 U.S. Census does not specifically identify assisted dwelling units or the structure types within which they occur. It also does not indicate the type of stock in which condominiums are located, or when rental dwellings are in resident-owned structures. Therefore, available city data were carefully analyzed to obtain an overview and identify current housing patterns, as described in this source paper.

To aid in tracing the 1980 to 1985 changes in Table VIa, the housing stock was divided into units located in 1-4 unit structures, and those in 5 or more multi-unit structures. The 1-4s, dubbed **1-4(SF)** for single family, are largely singles, duplexes and triple-deckers, and tend to have a high rate of owner occupancy. **PrAptSF** designates the private apartments rented in this stock. In 1984, significant condominium conversion of triple-deckers commenced in some districts, shown as **CondoSF**.

Multifamily is designated as **5+(MF)**, and includes private rentals in this stock, **PrAptMF**, and condominiums, **CondoMF**, as well as public housing owned and managed by the Boston Housing Authority, **BHA**. Subsidized housing, **SubsHsg**, refers the to privately-owned developments assisted under such federal programs as Section 221(d)(3), Section 236, and Section 8, as well as state assistance programs under EOCD and MHFA. The newly built assisted housing tends to be in multifamily structures, whereas the rehabilitated stock is more likely to be in 1-4 unit stock.

Table VIa also shows how the total stock in each time period is distributed, as well as the absolute and percent change.

d) - *U.S. Bureau of the Census, "County Business Patterns," 1983*

e) - *A Summary and Survey of Development in Boston, 1975 - 1989*, John Avault and Mark Johnson, April 1987, based on compilations maintained on "ULTRALIST" by the BRA Research Department